

## [Folklore of Communications]

### FOLKLORE OF COMMUNICATIONS OUTLINE

#### I. TIME

1. Clockwork 2. Time Off 3. The Iron Ring

#### II. SPACE

1. Sea and Sky 2. On the Beach 3. "Sparks, the Mighty Man"

#### I. CLOCKWORK

You go into a long room with a high ceiling and full of cruel white light. There's a racket like a million woodpeckers — the rat-a-tat-tat rat-a-tat-tat of maybe five hundred telegraph keys, and the click-click-click click-click of the code ribbons sprayed from the machines like confetti. The Woodpeckers are sending cables, while other operators, their eyes glued to the moving tape, are snapping up dot by dash incoming messages hot from the wires. The code messages received are simultaneously translated into blue type and pasted up on Postal Telegraph forms, which are dropped on a moving belt to be checked, classified and finally relayed to the district office for delivery.

You look around at the workers and you can hardly tell them from their machines: Row on row of stiff backs with pivoting heads, ballbearing eyes, and piston fingers moving up and down.

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And all the clocks in the wide bright room stare them in the face. The clocks, the clocks—two, four, six, ten, twenty of them. On square pillars, set eight feet apart down the middle

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of the room, are hung the big round dials. No matter which way you look, there's a clock with two black hands and a hurrying red minute hand. "Time is the Big Boss here."

That's what Manny said. "Yeah," he said, "Time's the Big Boss".... (a little grayish fellow, with keen screwed up eyes and a quick mechanical smile that he turns on and off suddenly... and his speech is somehow that way too — clipped into neat little pieces that might be pasted on telegraph forms)

... "Gimme a day, gimme an hour, fifteen minutes — alright — five minutes away from time. Can you do it? Can anybody? God? Naw. Look, ever stop to think? There's no way y'can get out of it. Not nobody. Ever stop to think? Y'know it's in my skin, in my clothes, in my food, from those clocks. it's in my sleep. I keep thinin' thinkin' of it lately — you can't get away from time. It's from being fed on it around here. For fifteen years. Fifteen years, five months and twenty — 3 seven days — and some odd hours. From eating hours, half-hours, quarters, minutes and seconds. Seconds most of all. The seconds digest hard. Look at the clocks. They're spilling minutes, and the machines are gobbling them up. And the ops too. So many seconds to read code, so many seconds to transcribe, so many to paste up the strips, and one second to stamp the time on the form — received at 4:22 p. m. E. S. T. It's the same day and night, night and day. The machines never stop. # Night work — it's the worst. I been on night shift, off and on. Electric light's hard on your eyes. But you got to have at least 60 watts over your left shoulder to read that little moving code strip. I've heard it said it's supposed to be the hardest job on the eyes next to diamond cutting. The strip runs along fast. Your eyes gotta keep up with it, and the same time your fingers type it up in words. Now they've started printing a purple-blue on an off-white strip. Supposed to be easier on the eye than black on white.

Heard tell of guys that get stagger-blindness from reading the tape. Everything moves backwards. As if you was on a train, 4 your eyes keep on moving everything backwards. It's from watching the tape jog along from left to right like it does. Seventy-five per cent of

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the ops wear glasses around here. Some wear green eyeshades, and some wear blinkers. Yeah, they'll fix two pieces of cardboard on each side of their head. Helps your eyes.

I knew a woman been on the phones thirty years. She got so's she couldn't hear nothing 'cept telegraph sounds. This was when they had ear receivers, instead of eye receivers. That is, you intercepted the code through the phones, not off the tape, and this woman got what they call telegraph deafness. What happened? She stayed on the job. It never hurt her work. Fact is she got to be faster that way. Couldn't hear nothing but telegraph signals, so no other sounds bothered her, and on account of it she got a raise. For the good of the Company they should figure out an operation to make every worker hear nothing and see nothing but telegraph sounds and symbols. It would speed up production.

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Take myself. I got what they call "the jitters" in my key finger. My hand will be resting on my knee or on a chair arm, and that finger goes right on moving up and down like it was transmitting signals — dot dot dash, dot dot dash — reflex action. It goes away and then comes back again. I'm used to it. But, y'know what? my wife will wake me up at night and tell me for heaven's sake to quit pecking around! I do it in my sleep. Wherever my hand's laying, up and down goes that finger, pounding the key for Postal Tel.

I used to think I'd pull out of this job. I never was crazy about it. But it's fifteen years, and now it might as well be for life. There's not too much choice any more. Used to be you could take it or leave it. Guys like myself were boomers. If you didn't like a place, you'd up and take a crack at the boss, pick up your key and walk out. Hit the next 'boom' town, show your key, and they'd take you on just like that. Only a few guys knew their Morse, and owned a key. Not like now with one or two companies holding the wires, and training their own men. But I'm not kicking. I'm lucky, in a way. You gotta realize it. What with the times — 6 unemployment — if a man crowding fifty holds a job anyplace, he's a lucky son-of-a-gun.

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It's only that I get to thinkin. And when I close my eyes I see them clocks. All telling the same time. And the sound of the machines clattering all together like that. Hundreds of them all together. [?] It's like waves in your ears and wind in your eyes day and night. You'd think you'd get used to it, but no, you keep on hearing it louder. Especially off the job, the silence ain't natural, and you start listening for it, and pretty soon you hear it, louder than ever. And your mind jumping from second to second as if it was a clock itself. And then I get to thinkin, what is time? A few seconds it takes to throw a message .[?] from Frisco to New York. But if you walk it, say without stopping, it takes two months. Then say, [?] they throw a wire [?] from Frisco at 1 p. m. It takes only a few seconds [?] to /get New York, but when it's intercepted, it's 4 p. m. E. S. T. Four hours just squeezed down to zero. Nothin but some [?] symbols on paper. And the same with clocks. Ain't they only symbols? And the numerals nothin but black 7 and red blobs. It's like a cheek that's no good. Only [?] symbols on paper behind glass. I heard in a lecture once how some fellow — a philosopher he was — said what time [?] is . “Time,” he says, “is the minute hand on the clock Clock of Eternity, that's kept in the watch-pocket of God.” Oh, yeah, I says, and [?] what if there ain't no God? Then there ain't no time either..... But say, my relief's up. it's two minutes to one — I gotta get back to the machine. “